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THE
T R I A L
OF
RELIGIOUS TRUTH

By its MORAL INFLUENCE.

A
S E R M O N,

Preached at the opening of the Synod of
Glasgow and Air, October 9th, 1759.

By J. WITHERSPOON, A. M.
Minister of the Gospel in Paisley.

G L A S G O W:

Printed for JAMES WILKEN, Bookseller in Paisley.
* M DCC LIX.

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Preached at the opening of the Broom of
Glasgow and Ayr, October 1799.

By J. WILKINSON, A. M.
Minister of the Gospel in Glasgow.

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S E R M O N, &c.

Matth. vii. 20. *Wherefore by their fruits
ye shall know them.*

EVERY one who hath any acquaintance with the writings of infidels, must know, that, there is no topic on which they insist at greater length, or with more plausibility, than the innumerable sects and parties into which the Christian world is divided. With what apparent triumph do they enlarge, on the contradictory tenets, which different persons profess to found upon the same scriptures, their violent opposition one to another, and the great difficulty, or rather impossibility of discovering truth, among so many, who pretend each to have the entire and exclusive possession of it.

Having gone thus far, it is easy and natural to proceed one step farther and affirm, that the great plurality of every denomination, do not embrace religion in general, or the tenets of their own sect in particular, from rational or personal conviction, but from a blind imitation of others, or an attachment to one or a few distinguished leaders, whose authority is stronger than all other evidence whatever. Thus is religi-

on, at once, supposed true and yet destroyed; that is to say, it is at one stroke, as it were, annihilated; in almost all who profess it, their opinions, whatever they are in themselves, being no more than implicit faith and party prejudice in those who embrace them.

The same visible state of the world, which gives occasion of triumph to the enemies of religion, gives, often, no small uneasiness and anxiety to its friends, particularly to the best and most dispassionate of every party. Serious and conscientious persons, when they reflect upon the divisions that prevail, when they are witnesses to the contention and mutual accusation of different parties, are ready to be overwhelmed with melancholy upon the prospect, as well as involved in doubt and perplexity, as to what course they themselves should hold. It is not uncommon to find persons of every rank in this situation, not only those of better education, who are able to take an extensive view of the state of things, in this and in preceeding ages; but also those of less knowlege and comprehension, when any violent debates happen to fall within the sphere of their own observation.

These reasons have induced me to make choice of the passage now read as the subject of discourse at this time. It contains the rule to which our Saviour appeals in his controversy with the Pharisees, and by which he, once and again, desires that their pretensions may be judged. I apprehend

prehend from the the context, that it is equally applicable to their characters and their principles, their integrity before God in their offices teachers of others, and the soundness of their doctrine as to its effects upon those who should receive it. These two things are, indeed, in a great measure connected together, or rather they are mutually involved in one another, though it is possible, and, in some few cases, profitable, to make a distinction between them.

What is further proposed, through the assistance of divine grace, in the prosecution of this subject, is,

- I. To show, that the rule here given by our Saviour is the best that could have been given, and that it is sufficient to distinguish truth from error.
- II. That this is in fact the rule by which all good men, and, indeed, mankind in general, so far as they are sincere, do judge, of religious principles and pretensions.
- III. To conclude with some reflections on the subject for the benefit both of ministers and people.

In the first place then it is proposed to show, that the rule here given by our Saviour is the best that could have been given, and that it is sufficient to distinguish truth from error. To

lay a foundation for this, it will be necessary to begin by settling, in as precise a manner as possible, the meaning of the rule, and to what cases it can be justly applied. *Ye shall know them by their fruits*, saith our Saviour—That is to say, when any person assumes the character of a divine teacher, and proposes any thing to your belief as from God, see whether its fruits be really suitable to its pretensions: particularly, you are to lay down this as a principle, that, as he is holy in his nature, every thing that proceeds from him must be holy in its tendency, and produce holiness as its fruit. In proportion as you see this effect in him who teaches it, and those who embrace it, so, receive it as true, or reject it as false.

By laying down the rule in these terms I do not mean to deny, that, when a revelation is first proposed as from God, or when the credit of such revelation in general is examined, miracles are a distinct and conclusive proof of a divine commission. I am persuaded that nothing is more vague and indeterminate, and, at the same time, a more manifest inverting the natural order of things, than to say with some, We must judge of the truth of a miracle by the nature of the doctrine in support of which it is wrought; and if this last is worthy of God, we may then admit the honorary testimony of the mighty work in its behalf. They do not attend to the great ignorance of man in all spiritual and divine things without revelation, and to the boldness of hu-

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man pride, who speak in this manner. I would rather include this as one of the proper fruits of a divine commission to teach any new doctrine, that signs be given of a superior power accompanying the prophet. Thus we see the Jews made this demand of our Saviour, *What sign shewest thou then, that we may see and believe thee? What dost thou work?* * It is true, in some instances, when, after many miracles, they persisted in asking new signs of their own devising, he condemns their obstinacy and refuses to gratify it. Notwithstanding this, we find him often appealing to his works as an attestation of the truth of his mission: thus he says, *Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me, or else believe me for the very works sake* †. And elsewhere, *If I had not done among them the works that none other man did, they had not had sin: but now they have both seen, and hated both me and my Father* ‡. Agreeably to this, we find Nicodemus drawing the conclusion, *Rabbi we know thou art a teacher come from God, for no man can do the miracles that thou dost except God be with him* §.

There is no doubt, however, that this must be inseparably joined with a purity of character, and sanctity of purpose. When these are wanting, it gives the justest ground of suspicion, leads to the strictest examination of miraculous

* John vi. 30. † John xiv. 11. ‡ John xv. 24.
§ John iii. 2.

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pretensions, and will certainly end in the discovery of such as are false. For this is the very excellence of the rule laid down by our Saviour, that, tho' reason may be very unfit to pass an independent judgment upon truth and error, conscience may, with little danger of mistake, reject what is evil, and yield its approbation to what is good.

But what I have chiefly in view is, that supposing the truth of the gospel in general, particular opinions and practices must be tried in this manner. As the gospel is allowed on all hands to be a doctrine according to godliness, when differences arise, and each opposite side pretends to have the letter of the law in its favour, the great rule of decision is, which doth most immediately, and most certainly, promote piety and holiness in all manner of conversation. In this way every doctrinal opinion, every form of government, and every rite and practice in worship may be brought to the test and tried by its fruits.

As opinions, so characters must be tried in the same manner. The truth is, this, tho' deserving particular mention, is included in, or is but a part and branch of the other. To pass a judgment on particular characters is of very small moment, or rather, a peremptory decision of this kind is both unnecessary, and improper, unless when it is of weight in a cause. It is only prophets and teachers that fall to be singly, or personally tried, because they are supposed to exhibit, in their

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own practice, an example of the force and influence of their principles. If on them they have no effect that is good, there is not the least pretence for insisting that others should embrace them.

Nothing farther seems necessary by way of explication of this rule, save to observe from the context, that fair and plausible pretences, either of opinions or characters, must be examined with particular care, as being most ready to deceive; and the trial must be more by facts than by reasoning, as is implied in the very language used in the text, *by their fruits ye shall know them.*

The excellency of this rule may be comprehended under the two following particulars, 1st, Its certainty. 2^{dly}, Its perspicuity.

The first of these will admit of little dispute. As God is infinitely holy in his own nature, every discovery that he has made to any of his creatures, must carry this impression upon it, and have a tendency to promote holiness in them. And, as this is manifestly the design of the sacred oracles, and that system of divine truth which they contain, every thing by way of opinion, or practice, that pretends to derive its authority from them, may lawfully be tried by this rule, Will it make us more holy than before?

It is of moment here to observe, that this rule hath a deep and solid foundation. It proceeds upon the supposition, that all natural are inferior to moral qualities; that even the noblest

blest intellectual abilities are only so far valuable, as they are subservient to moral perfection; or in other words, that truth is in order to goodness. It is not (as has been often said) in his Almighty power, his infinite wisdom, or the immensity of his Being, that the glory of God chiefly consists, but in his immaculate holiness and spotless purity. Each part of the divine character, indeed, derives a lustre from the other. It is the union of greatness and goodness that makes him truly God. His moral excellence becomes infinite in value and efficacy by residing in an infinite subject. But if it were possible to separate his natural perfections from his moral excellence, or could we suppose them joined to malignity of disposition, he would be the proper object, (let us speak it with reverence), not of supreme love, but of infinite detestation.

This is more than sufficient to support the order in which things are represented above, and show, that its moral influence is the proper touchstone and trial of religious truth. These doctrines only come from God which tend to form us after the divine image. Thus far, perhaps, all will allow it to be true; at least the assertion is common. But be pleased to observe, that this necessarily supposes the sure and infallibly efficacy of real truth in promoting holiness, and the insufficiency of error and falshood for this purpose. If these were not both alike certain, the rule would be equivocal and absurd. If men by

believing lies could attain to unfeigned goodness and true holiness, then their moral effect could not in the least serve to distinguish between truth and error. It is no less plain that if so absurd a supposition is admitted but for a moment, the value of truth is wholly destroyed, and no wise man will employ his time and pains in endeavouring to discover, to communicate, or to defend it.

The other particular comprehended under the excellence of this rule, is its perspicuity; That it is not only sure and infallible in itself, but capable of an easy application by those who have occasion to use it. Here, if any where, there is room for doubt and disputation. Here, it may be alledged, all the confusion and uncertainty returns, which was before complained of, and for which a remedy was required. Men will still differ in their opinions as to what is true goodness. Besides, they will still debate the sincerity of many pretensions, and the reality of many appearances; and, as art and hypocrisy will always be used on the one hand, delusion must be the unavoidable consequence on the other.

This however is no more than the necessary consequence of human imperfection. It cannot be denied, and it may, without any hesitation, be confessed, that men are liable to err, and that many have erred in the application of this rule. But, who can from thence justly infer, that it is not of sufficient clearness, to direct those who will

will honestly make use of it, and to lay the terror of those who are misled entirely at their own door?

It pleased God to write his law upon the heart of man at first. And the great lines of duty, however obscured by our original apostacy, are still so visible, as to afford an opportunity of judging, what conduct and practice is, or is not agreeable to its dictates. It will be found from experience, that men are able to determine on this point, with far greater certainty, than on any other subject of religion: that is to say, they can perceive the excellency of the end, when they are in much doubt about the means, in themselves, or separately considered.

Such authority hath natural conscience, still, in man, that it renders those who, in their own conduct, despise its reproofs, inexcusable in the sight of God *. But, it is of importance in the present argument to observe, that every one is able to pass a far surer judgment on the moral character of another, than his own. The pollution of the heart brings a corrupt bias on the judgment, in a man's own case, and makes him palliate and defend those sins, to which he is strongly inclined, or of which he hath been already guilty: whereas in determining the characters of others, this bias is less sensibly felt. This is perhaps the true and only reason why

* See *Rom.* i. 20. ii. 14.

any deference is paid to virtue as praise-worthy, by those who are enemies to it in their hearts, or any public honour and respect given to the service of God, in the world, where so great a majority are evidently in the interests of another master.

One singular-excellence of this rule is, its being the most universally intelligible. It is level to the capacity of men of all degrees of understanding. There is little difference, if any, in this respect, between the wise and the unwise, the learned and the ignorant. Perhaps this circumstance alone ought to give it, in justice, the preference, to every other test of religious truth. Religion is the concern of all alike, and therefore, what relates to it should be open to all. It was the character, and the glory of the gospel, at its first publication, that it was preached to the poor. And, by this it is still distinguished, not only from many or most false religions, but, especially, from those philosophical speculations, in which the enemies of all religion place their chief strength. When we peruse a system or theory of moral virtue, the principles of which are very refined, or the reasoning upon it abstracted and above the comprehension of the vulgar, it may be ingenious, but it carries in itself a demonstration, that, because it is unfit, it could never be intended for general use.

Here, then, lies the great advantage of the rule laid down by our Saviour. The bulk of man-

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kind, those of lower rank, and even those among them of weakest or least cultivated understanding, are able to judge of the effects of principles, or to see the beauty of an excellent character, when they are not able to examine a doctrine, or apprehend the reasoning upon which it is founded. The dictates of conscience are often immediate and clear, when the deductions of reason are long and involved. To make intricate researches in theory, requires great natural abilities, which are the portion of very few; but to judge of a visible character requires only an impartial sense of right and wrong. Of this the plain man is as susceptible as the most acute by nature, or the most enlightened by education. In God Almighty, infinite knowledge and infinite holiness are united, and, we have reason to think, that, in their perfection, they are inseparable. But we know, by experience, that they do not bear an exact proportion to one another in inferior natures, at least, among sinful creatures. There may be, and there often is, great virtue and goodness in a mean capacity, and great depravity in persons of eminent ability.

From these considerations it is plain that this rule of trying a doctrine by its effects, as a tree by its fruits, may be applied by the meanest as well as the greatest, and with as little danger of mistake. Perhaps it might have been safely affirmed with less danger of mistake. Great intellectual

intellectual abilities, and great natural advantages of every kind are very ready to swell the mind with pride and self-conceit, than which no disposition is, in itself more odious in the sight of God, or more unfavourable to the discovery of truth. This seems to be confirmed by experience, and it is plainly the view given us of our present state in the holy scriptures. Thus the apostle Paul says, *Ye see your calling brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble are called. But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world, to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty, and base things of the world, and things which are despised hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: that no flesh should glory in his presence †.* For the very same thing we find our blessed Redeemer adoring the depth and sovereignty of divine providence, in the following terms, *In that hour Jesus rejoiced in spirit, and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes: even so Father for so it seemed good in thy sight †.*

Mistakes, however, after all there will be, and some differences even among the best; but, from

† 1 Cor. i. 26.—29.

† Luke x. 21.

this very circumstance, I derive another great excellence of the rule above laid down, that, it is not only the test of truth for a man's self, but the measure of forbearance with regard to others. By carefully examining their fruits, men may not only be directed what to embrace, and what capital and fundamental errors wholly to reject, but also in what particulars to exercise mutual forbearance, and, tho' smaller differences still subsist, to receive one another to the glory of God. If in any person or persons, of whatever party, you perceive the spirit of true and undefiled religion, they are accepted of God, and should not be condemned by you. This ought, not in justice, to induce you to approve or embrace every one of their principles, or every part of their practice, of which perhaps you have seen or felt the bad tendency; yet should it engage you to love them with unfeigned affection, as sincere, though, in some measure, mistaken servants of our common Lord.

I hope it appears from the preceeding observations, that this rule, of trying every principle or profession by its fruits, is the best that could have been given. It is certain and infallible in itself, and we are less liable to mistake in the use of it, than of any other. There seems, indeed to be an exact analogy between this rule in religious matters, and reason in our common and civil concerns. Reason is the best guide and director of human life. There is, certainly, an essential
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difference between wisdom and folly, in the nature of things. They are also sensibly opposite to one another in their extremes. Innumerable actions, however, there are, or modes of action, of a more doubtful and disputable nature, as to the wisdom or weakness of which, hardly any two men would be entirely of the same opinion. Let the enemy of religion make the application, who denies its reality, because all good men are not of the same mind; or because there are different parties and professions who oppose one another in some opinions and practices. He acts just the same part, as he, who seeing the differences of judgment among men, upon almost every subject that falls under their deliberation, should renounce the use of reason, or deny that there is, in nature, any such thing.

We now proceed to the second thing proposed, to show, that the rule above explained and defended, is that by which, in fact, all serious persons, and, indeed, mankind in general, so far as they are sincere, do judge of religious principles and pretensions.

By serious persons, I understand all those who are truly religious, in opposition to those who have only a nominal and customary profession. If we would speak with precision, or reason in a just and conclusive manner, we must keep this distinction constantly in view. Nothing does more harm to any cause than a treacherous friend or bosom enemy: and nothing does more hurt

to the interest of religion, than its being loaded with a great number, who, for many obvious reasons, assume the form, while they are strangers to the power of it. The fallacy of almost all the reasonings of infidels lies here. They consider religion as answerable for all the hypocrisy of those who profess it, and all the wickedness of those who have not renounced the profession; as if in order to its being true, it must be impossible for any to counterfeit it. If that were the case, no thanks would be due to impartial enquiry. All colour of objection being taken away, the assent would not be yielded, but compelled. This, doubtless, the presumptuous wisdom of man ordinarily dictates, but according to the superior wisdom of God *offences must come—and heresies also, that they that are approved may be made manifest.*

Supposing, therefore, the important distinction between real and nominal Christians, all of the first character, of every age, and of every party, are so far from being under the influence of implicit faith, that they try the truth by its fruits, and adhere to it for its effects. There is something more in the case of every good man, than barely a rational persuasion of the truth of religion in general, from the arguments adduced to support it. The truths of the gospel give him such a view of himself, and his own state, as experience shews him to be true. In the gospel he finds a remedy proposed for his guilt and mis-

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ry, which, besides all the other evidences of its divine original, is exactly suited to his felt condition. Add to both these, that he immediately experiences its happy effect, not only in laying the best foundation for his peace, but in operating a thorough change in his heart and life. Thus hath every real Christian, an inward and experimental proof of the truth of the gospel, not contrary, but superior to, stronger and more stable than any speculative reasoning. In this sense we are to understand the words of the apostle John, *He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself**. This is common to all real believers of whatever denomination, who not only are perfectly agreed in the essentials of religion, but much more agreed in every thing material, than they themselves either clearly apprehend, or are willing to confess.

So far every good man must be acquitted from the charge of implicit faith; we may adopt concerning all such the words of our Saviour to Peter, *Blessed art thou Simon Barjona: For flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven†*. It is no less plain, that, in every thing that is supposed to make a part of, or that hath any connexion with religion, they judge by the same rule. In all these modes of opinion in lesser matters, in all these circumstances, which serve to distinguish one sect

* 1 John v. 9.

† Matth. xvi. 17.

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from another, tho' they may determine in different, nay, in opposite ways, yet they all proceed upon the same general rule, viz. the influence which such disputed point has, as a mean, upon the substance and end of all religion. This appears from the reasoning on each side, in all religious disputes. This principle as common to both is often expressly mentioned, and always manifestly implied; that those doctrines or that way of expressing doctrines, and those practices, which are in fact most conducive to holiness, are, and, for that very reason must be, most agreeable to the will of God.

But what I have chiefly in view is, to show, that this appears, from the very fact usually brought to prove, that the religion of almost all mankind is no better than implicit faith. The fact, I mean is, that the bulk of mankind is greatly swayed, in the choice of opinion, by the authority and example of others. This, indeed, does not hold so generally as is commonly supposed. We have seen above, that it doth not hold, with regard to the substance of religion, in any good man; for in this he will call no man master on earth. But even when it does hold, it is, perhaps, not so blameable as many are apt to imagine. Let it be admitted then, that, in many instances, it is the authority and example of men, more than any other reason that determines the judgment. Let it be admitted, that this is the case with the bulk of mankind, and, even, in some mea-

measure with the best. I must be allowed to ask, what is it that procures these persons such authority? What is it that first begins, establishes, or perpetuates their influence? Nothing else, but the real or apparent sanctity of their character. In vain will a profligate, or one manifestly destitute of personal worth, set himself at the head of a party, or attempt to draw away disciples after him. It is the supposed piety and probity of the person that gives weight to his example, and force to his precepts. This weighs more with the sober serious part of mankind, and, indeed, with mankind in general, than the greatest intellectual abilities, and otherwise most admired talents; Whoever has acquired a great reputation for piety and sincerity, will, with little art, or rather no art at all, nay, without so much as intending it, bring his principles and practice into repute. At the same time, one of a contrary character with all the powers of eloquence, and every other outward advantage, shall fail in attempting to persuade. Now, what is this but that mankind proceed mainly in their judgment, upon the very rule which I have endeavoured to show is the best they could have chosen. They try principles by their effects, as a tree by its fruits. Wherever they see the best man, they conclude, that he must be acted by the most excellent, as well as the most powerful principles. The multitude or lower class of mankind, are usually the scorn of half-thinkers, and superficial reasoners, for this attachment to per-

persons. But were a comparison faithfully made between the several motives of choice in different classes, there would be no great cause of triumph. At any rate when we consider how unfit the plurality of mankind are to judge in an intricate debate, darkened, perhaps, by the art and subtilty of those who handle it, we shall find they are little, if at all, to blame. In one view, no doubt, they may be said to be acted by implicit faith, but in truth, and at bottom, they are following the wisest and most salutary of all moral maxims.

A survey of the history, either of religion in general, or of the Christian religion in particular, would set this matter in the clearest light. But little of this kind can come within the limits of a single discourse. I shall not therefore stay to mention the retired manner of life, and pretended sanctity, of the inventors of the heathen idolatry, tho' it might be applied to this subject; and would serve to shew the universal sense, and general expectation of mankind. There is a saying of an eminent and violent enemy of the Christian faith, 'That gravity is of the very essence of imposture.' This is nothing else but a perverted view, and malicious representation of the general truth, that apparent sanctity is necessary to establish any sacred authority. But is there any thing more unquestionable, or that hath been more frequently observed, than that the victory of truth over error in the first ages of Christianity, was much more owing to the shining piety of the primi-

primitive Christians in general, together with the patience and constancy of the martyrs, than to any other mean. Reason may convince the understanding, but example seizes, and keeps possession of the heart. It was the eminent piety and usefulness of the saints in former ages, which attracted such veneration, and love, from the multitude, as soon proceeded to a criminal excess. Not content with imitating the amiable example of those whom they held in such esteem, by a natural association they affixed a sanctity to relicts, and this produced a variety of superstitious practices. I cannot also, help being of opinion, that it was the severe and mortified lives of many of the retired devotees in the Romish church, that kept that corrupt body in credit, for some ages longer than it could have otherwise continued.

On the other hand, who does not know, that the most formidable and successful attacks made by the reformers on that mother of abominations, were their exposing the corrupt and dissolute lives of her priests and members. This they were at no small pains to do, both in a grave and in an ironical strain. As the covetousness and ambition of many, and the licentious debauchery of others of the clergy, first brought the doctrines into suspicion, so, those examples when held up to light, made a far greater number of converts, than any absurdities in belief, how gross and palpable soever. The truth is, we find all parties greedily lay hold of this weapon when-

whenever it is presented to them, and use it with great confidence against their adversaries; and in so doing they discover a conviction, that principles are never so powerfully supported as by the good, nor so effectually disparaged as by the bad characters of those who profess them.

If we leave the history of former ages, and examine the state of the present, the same truth will still be the result of our enquiry, and appear with increasing evidence. Different parties and denominations prevail in different places: and wherever any party or denomination greatly prevails the effect may be easily traced up to its cause; and will appear, by no very distant tradition, to have been owing to the eminent piety of some one or more of that profession, in a former period, or, which is much the same, to the comparatively odious and vitious characters of those who opposed them *.

* Our own country will afford us some sensible and striking proofs of the justice of this observation. There had been a struggle, from the very first dawn of the reformation, between Presbytery and Episcopacy in Scotland. This contest however came to its greatest height about 100 years ago, when the Presbyterians were ejected, and Episcopacy was established by a tyrannical civil government; and continued by a severe and cruel persecution. We had by this means a trial of both: and it is very observable, that the odium which justly fell upon Episcopacy, from the rage and inhumanity of those who had the chief direction, was the circumstance that deter-

It is no just objection to the account here given, that we find instances, in which principles seem to give a sanction to characters, instead of receiving support from them. There are, no doubt, cases in which a man's being known to embrace certain principles will be alone sufficient to make him odious, however blameless, or even praise-worthy his conduct be, in every other respect. At the same time, perhaps, the failings of another shall be either wholly pardoned, or greatly extenuated if he espouse, but especially, if he is active in vindicating the principles which are held sacred. But this is no more than

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 determined the body of the nation to endeavour its subversion. Yet, wherever there happened to be a few ministers of that persuasion pious in their lives, and diligent in the duties of their office, there were many persons and families who joined with them in communion, and their posterity adhere to that opinion even to this day. This was the case in some places of the east and north country. But in the western parts of Scotland where the Episcopal clergy were, almost to a man, ignorant, slothful or vicious, they were universally deserted, and hardly a single adherent to that persuasion is now to be found. —

I cannot omit mentioning here what was said by a lady of quality, at that time, to Dr Burnet when he came to visit the west country. It was to the following purpose, 'We of the laity cannot judge upon controversial points, but we see these men whom you persecute, grave in their deportment, strictly holy in their conversation, and very laborious in their functions, while many of your clergy are ignorant, slothful and vicious.' This is what determines the judgment of the people.

the natural and necessary consequence of any set of principles being once firmly established. They acquire their credit at, first, in the way I have already mentioned; but when that credit is high, it will bring a suspicion upon every thing that opposes it, however specious and promising in outward appearance. There is nothing surprising here, nor, indeed, any thing but what is perfectly natural, for as one or a few instances commonly do not, so in reason, they ought not, to shake the reputation of truths, which have been established by long experience of their worth and efficacy. Neither must it be forgotten, that when examples seem to stand in opposition one to another, and to lead to different conclusions, it is not from one or two that a judgment can be passed, but from many, and these compared and examined with great diligence and care.

I conclude the illustration of this head with remarking, that the principle above laid down will explain, in a clear and satisfying manner, two appearances in the moral world, which seem directly to contradict one another. By what happens sometimes in religion, we shall be apt to conclude, that there is in human nature a proneness to change, or a love of novelty purely on its own account. Accordingly we find this laid to the charge of mankind by several authors. And it cannot be denied, that some men, or sects, often introduce new practices, which

acquire great reputation, and almost universal acceptance. By other examples, however, we are taught to ascribe to human nature a strong attachment to old opinions, and hatred of all innovation. What is remarkable is, that both these take place chiefly in little circumstances, and things of small moment; new inventions being sometimes gone into with a zeal, and old customs adhered to with an obstinacy, which the intrinsic value of the things contended for does not seem to merit on either side. To ascribe this to the different dispositions of individuals will not be a satisfactory solution, for we see sometimes examples of both in the same persons. But, by searching a little deeper, we shall unravel this difficulty, and discover, that though the love of novelty, or a veneration for antiquity may be sometimes the immediate principle of action, there is another ultimate principle which is the cause of both, and, in different circumstances, produces either the one or the other. This principle is no other than that admiration of real or supposed worth, which has been illustrated above. Whoever hath acquired a great reputation for piety and holiness, may easily introduce any indifferent practice, though not common before, especially, if it be considered as an evidence or expression of his piety. On this supposition, his differing from, or doing more than others, will be taken notice of to his

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praise †. But he may much more easily introduce a new than depart from an old custom. The reason is plain; for, ancient customs, having been established on the ground already assigned, men are usually very tenacious of them, and it requires no small degree of credit and character, either to change or to abolish them.

We now proceed to make some practical improvement of what has been said.

In the first place, from what has been said upon this subject we may derive one of the plainest and most satisfying proofs of the truth of the gospel. A proof, level to the meanest capacity, and, therefore, proper to preserve ordinary Christians from being shaken by the bold and insolent attacks now made on religion by some of the lowest rank. A proof, at the same time, not only deserving the attention of the most intelligent, but which of all others, is certainly the most decisive. Let us try it by its fruits. Let us compare the temper and character of real Christians, with those of infidels, and see which of them best me-

† There is great reason to think that it was in this very way that many different rites were brought into the Christian church, which in a long course of time grew into a mass of abominable superstition. They were at first, perhaps, but the modes or circumstances of the worship, or practice of pious persons, but from being voluntary and purely circumstantial, they came by degrees to be considered as parts of religious worship; and therefore sinful in the performers, but much more sinful in the imposers.

its the approbation of an honest and impartial judge. Let us take in every circumstance that will contribute to make the comparison just and fair, and see what will be the result. I say this, because I can by no means allow, that great multitudes, though born in a country where Christianity is professed, ought to be considered as Christians, when they are open and violent enemies to the gospel in all its parts. They ought rather to be thrown into the scale of infidelity. But, since most of them have formed no fixed principles at all, because they have never thought upon the subject, we shall leave them entirely out of the question.

Is, then, the character and practice of infidels in general once to be compared with that of such Christians as believe upon personal conviction? However much the natural sense of right and wrong may be obscured and perverted in some, I should think there are very few, who will not manifestly perceive to whom the preference is due. In which of the two do you find the most regular and fervent piety towards God? Here, perhaps, it will be said, This is what no man expects to find in unbelievers, it is no part of their plan, and therefore ought not to be included in the comparison. But as the general sense of mankind does not require it, so I can never suffer that our duty to God should be erased out of the moral law. Besides, the general pretence now, is not Atheism but Theism.

The question is therefore altogether pertinent; and persons of this character are self-condemned, who, by their total neglect of all religious worship, are as much chargeable with impiety as infidelity.—In which of the two is to be found the greatest integrity and uprightness in their commerce between man and man, the most unfeigned good-will, and most active beneficence to others? Is it the unbeliever, or the Christian, who clothes the naked and deals his bread to the hungry? Ask the many noble and ancient structures raised for the relief of the diseased and the poor, to whom they owe their establishment and support?—Which of these two classes of men are most remarkable for self-government? How often is the unexperienced youth initiated in debauchery of all kinds, by these very friends of mankind, who charitably declaim against priesthood and delusion, and happily eradicate the prejudices of education, by treating religion and all religious persons with derision and scorn? With what fatal success has the infidel often seduced the unwary virgin into the destructive path of lust, by first loosening the obligation of religion, and then justifying the indulgence of every natural desire. We shall carry the comparison no further in this place; but I must beg of every one who hath had the happiness to be acquainted with an eminently pious, humble, active, useful Christian, to say, whether he can admit it as possible, under the administration of
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a wise and good God, that such a person is governed by a fable invented by designing villians, while the infidel alone is in possession of the truth, which is pure in its nature, and must be proven by its fruits †.

In the 2^d place, since not only religion in general, but every particular doctrine of religion ought to be tried by its fruits, let neither ministers, nor people, ever lose view of this great

† I am sensible it is often pretended, that several infidels, have been men of unblemished morals. Collins was a good man, say some, and Shaftesbury was yet a better man. Perhaps, these individuals might not be chargeable with the most open dissoluti^{on}, and grossest sensuality, which would have been inconsistent with their giving themselves to close study and application. Besides, they who assailed with so much boldness established opinions, must have been under a considerable restraint, from a regard to their character and cause. This ought not to be rejected as an improbable supposition, or uncharitable allegation against them, who so liberally reproach others, with insincere, hypocritical, and saint-like pretences. But, after all, making even the largest allowances, there is one piece of conduct, of which both the above named persons were habitually guilty, which it is impossible for me to reconcile with good morals, even upon the laxest principles that have ever yet been avowed. What I mean was, their solemnly receiving the holy sacrament, to qualify themselves for bearing office in their country, though they believed it to be altogether imposture and deceit. This was such a piece of gross and aggravated dissimulation, as it is impossible either to defend in itself, or to suppose consistent with integrity upon the whole.

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rule in the doctrines which they teach on the one hand, or embrace on the other. Let us also particularly remember, that no credit is to be given to any high professions or bold pretences, but, in so far, as they are confirmed by the fact. I observe here, with much pleasure, what advantage the fundamental scripture doctrines, which have been long the glory and happiness of this church, will derive from a fair and full enquiry, into their influence and effects. The doctrines I mean are, The lost state of man by nature; Salvation by the free grace of God; justification by the imputed righteousness of Christ; and sanctification by the effectual operation of the holy Spirit. These were the doctrines of the Reformation, when their excellence was put beyond all doubt or question, by their powerful and valuable effects. Many adversaries, indeed, soon rose up to contradict or to corrupt them; and it is much to be lamented that they are, at present, by many, so boldly, and so violently opposed in this once happy island. But we may venture to affirm, that, when the doctrine of the cross retained its purity and simplicity, then was true religion, including every moral virtue, seen to grow from it as its fruit. On the other hand, when and wherever it has been run down, and a pretended moral doctrine has been introduced, to the prejudice and subversion of the grace of God, it hath been always followed by a deluge of profanity and immorality in
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practice. It is easy and common, to disguise the truth by misrepresentation, or to vilify it by opprobrious titles. It is easy to pretend a warm zeal for the great doctrines of morality, and frequently to repeat, in a pulpit, the necessity of holiness in general; but all impartial persons ought, and the world in general will judge more by works than by words. Let us suppose, for example, the old objection revived against a minister who preaches the doctrine of grace, that it loosens the obligations to holiness of life. The objection is, of all others, the most specious: yet, if that minister discharges his duty with zeal and diligence, watches over his people's souls, reproving, rebuking, exhorting with all long-suffering and doctrine; is strict and holy in his own conversation, abhorring and flying from the society of the ungodly; and if the effect of his ministry be to turn many sinners from the error of their ways, and to make an intelligent, serious, regular people, the accusation will not be received: and who will say that it ought? On the other hand, is any minister more covetous of the fleece, than diligent for the welfare of the flock; cold and heartless in his sacred work, but loud and noisy in promiscuous and foolish conversation; careless or partial in the exercise of discipline; covering, or palliating the sins of the great, because they may promote him; making friends and companions of profane persons; tho' this man's zeal should burn like a flame against Antinomi-

tinomianism, and tho' his own unvaried strain should be the necessity of holiness, I would never take him to be any of it's real friends.

Let us not, my brethren, deceive our selves, or attempt to deceive others by plausible pretences. Let us all be zealous for good works : not the name, but the thing. Let us not expect to promote them by a little cold reasoning, or affected flowery declamation; but by the simplicity of the gospel; by the doctrine of the cross, which will not only tell men that they ought to be holy, but effectually bring them to that happy state. The leading principle of true holiness, according to the gospel, is a deep and grateful sense of redeeming love. *For the love of Christ constraineth us, because we thus judge, that if one died for all then were all dead, and that he died for all, that they which live, should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again*.*

In the 3^d place, from what has been said on this subject you may see, in a very strong light, how necessary it is, that ministers should be, not only really but visibly and eminently holy; and with how much care they are bound to avoid every appearance of evil. There are some ministers who strongly plead for liberty and freedom, and loudly complain of the malice, uncharitableness, and censoriousness of the world. They

* 2 Cor. v. 14.

seem as if they desired, nay, which is still more foolish, expected, that no part of their conduct should be attended to, or any inference drawn from it, with respect to their character. This will never be the case till they are invisible. It appears, from what hath been said in the preceding discourse, that it is the right and the duty of every man to try a minister by his fruits. Ignorance indeed, may sometimes be guilty of mistakes to our prejudice, and malice or envy may go too far; yet this is only what we ought to lay our account with, and it should excite us, not to a contempt of the judgment of others, but to greater strictness and circumspection, that *they may be ashamed who falsely accuse our good conversation in Christ.*

It is very hurtful in this as in many other cases, when a man views things only on one side. Some are apt to impute so much to the malice and uncharitableness of the world, that they seldom or never think themselves as truly guilty of any offence or miscarriage. I am persuaded many are in a manner blinded to the errors of their own conduct, by this very circumstance. Or, if they cannot but be sensible, that they have been guilty of something that was wrong, when the fault is aggravated by report, they seem to think that this atones for any thing really blameworthy, and so are hardened both against confession and repentance. To speak without prejudice, it is more than probable, that we are as
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much chargeable with unguarded and offensive conduct, on the one hand, as the world with precipitate or partial judgment on the other. It hath been sometimes observed, that the multitude or common people are but poor judges of a man's ability or learning, but they are very good judges of his life. There is a great deal of truth in this observation; and to support it I add, that even a hypocritical pretence is extremely hard to maintain, and so often betrays itself by little circumstances that there are very few whose real character, is not better understood by the world than themselves. The chief exception I know to this is the case of violent party disputes. The injustice done to characters on each side, there, is very great. If you take a man's character from one to whom he stands in party opposition, you must conceive him not a man but a monster. But, (setting this aside, which does not fall within the compass of our present subject) in general it is surely much more becoming, and it is infinitely more safe for us to suspect ourselves, than to complain of hard measure from the world. Let us therefore, by doubling our diligence in every personal and ministerial duty endeavour to *make our light to shine before men, that they may see our good works, and glorify our Father which is in heaven* *.

* Matth. v. 16.

In the 4th place I must now take liberty, in fidelity to the trust committed to me, to be a little more particular in the application of this subject, and to enquire, whether ministers are not, in a good measure, chargeable with the low state to which religion is, at present, reduced. May I not say without offence, that an eminent, holy, diligent, and successful gospel ministry was once the glory and blessing of this part of the united kingdom? But how are we since fallen asleep! *How is the gold become dim! How is the most fine gold changed!* That there is a difference is plain; and that this difference does not lie in inferior abilities or a less proportion of learning is equally certain. I am sensible, that this is a part of my subject which would require to be touched with a very tender and delicate hand, and that, perhaps, I run as great a hazard to inflame and exasperate the sore, as to bring any effectual cure. This is, indeed, itself, one strong symptom of our disease, that we cannot endure plain dealing; and there is not a single circumstance, in which there is a greater difference between this and the preceeding age. What, in former times, would have been reckoned (to speak in their language) no more than plainness and ministerial freedom, would now be called the most slanderous invective and unpardonable abuse. Instead, therefore, of taking upon me to say who are chiefly to be blamed as the criminal causes of it, I shall only affirm and lament the

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melancholly effect, that we have in many places of this church a despised, forsaken, useless ministry; that many of the people have gone from mountain to mountain, and forgotten their resting place, while a still greater number is fast asleep in ignorance security and sloth. Where is that union, that mutual esteem and affection, which once subsisted between ministers and their people. It must be acknowledged, that their influence and authority is, now, in a great measure lost, and, therefore, I may safely conclude that their usefulness is gone. That the fault is all on one side, is neither a modest nor a probable supposition. Should we throw the blame off ourselves, what a terrible load must we, thereby, lay upon others? We must suppose and say, that under a blameless ministry, under the best and purest of instruction one part of the nation is sunk in brutality and sloth, and the other rent in pieces by division, and religion lost in the fury of contending parties.

We may say so, my brethren, and some do say what amounts to the same thing; but it is not credible. I do, therefore, in the most earnest manner beseech every minister in this audience, seriously to think, how far he hath given just cause to his people to despise his person, or desert his ministrations. Let us not so insist upon the ignorance, prejudices, and weakness of the giddy multitude, as if a failure on our part was impossible. We may be sometimes blamed in the

the wrong place; but we have, perhaps, as much respect in general, as we really deserve. Do not think it is sufficient that you are free from gross crimes, such as blasphemy, riot, and unclean lust. Blessed be God, nothing of this kind would yet be suffered among us without censure. But there are many other things, which, either separately or together, render a minister justly contemptible, on which no law, either civil or ecclesiastical can lay hold. If one set apart to the service of Christ in the gospel, manifestly shows his duty to be a burden, and does no more work than is barely sufficient to screen him from censure; if he reckons it a piece of improvement how seldom or how short he can preach, and makes his boast how many omissions he has brought a patient, and an injured people to endure without complaint; while, at the same time, he cannot speak with temper, of those who are willing to do more than himself however impossible it may be to ascertain his faults by a libel, he justly merits the detestation of every faithful minister, and every real Christian.

The things here in view, tho' they are easily seen, are difficult to describe; and, therefore, I shall not attempt to be more particular. But I cannot forbear warning you against, and pointing out the evil of two pieces of dishonesty, which may possibly be found united to gravity and decency in other respects. One of them is common in our neighbour kingdom, and may

possibly have taken place among us, tho' I cannot affirm it. The other, I am certain, hath many times taken place in the church of Scotland. The first is a minister's subscribing articles of doctrine, which he does not believe. This is so direct a violation of sincerity, that it is astonishing to think, how men can set their minds at ease in the prospect, or keep them in peace after the deliberate commission of it. The very excuses and evasions, that are offered in defence of it, are a disgrace to reason as well as a scandal to religion. What success can be expected from that man's ministry, who begins it with an act of such complicated guilt. How can he take upon him to reprove others for sin, or to train them up in virtue and true goodness, while himself is chargeable with direct, premeditated, and perpetual perjury. I know nothing so nearly resembling it, as those cases in trade, in which men make false entries, and, at once screen, and aggravate their fraud, by swearing, or causing others swear contrary to truth. This is justly reputed scandalous even in the world, and yet I know no circumstance in which they differ, that does not tend to show it to be less criminal than the other. We are not yet so much hardened in this sin as many in our neighbour church, for I have never found any among us so bold, as to profess and defend it. But, if no such thing is at all admitted among us, Why is there so heavy a suspicion of it? Why do so many complain,

plain, that the great and operative doctrines of the gospel are withdrawn, and an unsubstantial theory of virtue substituted in their place? Or why are not such complaints put to silence since it may be so easily done? Appearances are certainly such as will warrant me in mentioning it upon this occasion: and I have particularly chosen to introduce it upon this subject, that I may attack it not as an error, but as a fraud, not as a mistake in judgment, but an instance of gross dishonesty, and insincerity of heart. Supposing, therefore, that there may possibly be truth in the charge against some of us, I must beg every minister, but especially those young persons who have an eye to that sacred office to remember, that God will not be mocked, tho' the world may be deceived. In his sight, no gravity of deportment, no pretence to freedom of inquiry, a thing excellent in itself, no regular exercise of the right of private judgment will warrant or excuse such a lie for gain, as solemnly to subscribe what they do not believe.

The other particular I proposed to mention is the solemn attestation of men's characters, not only in general, but for particular qualities, without any satisfying knowledge whether the thing affirmed is true or false. This hath been often done in the church of Scotland, not by particular persons, with whom we might renounce relation, but by consent of many, gravely and deliberately in constituted Courts. Can we avoid

making the following obvious but melancholy reflection, How great is the blindness of men to those sins which are introduced by degrees and countenanced by prevailing fashion? Should we be told by an historian of credit, that, in one of the dark and corrupt ages of Popery, it was common for a body of ministers, when desired, to give a signed attestation to particular persons, that they were strict observers of the Sabbath, and worshipped God regularly in their families, while the persons attesting knew nothing of the matter, and, in fact, with regard to some of them, it was absolutely false. Would there be a dissenting voice, in affirming, that such men must have been lost to all sense of integrity, and utterly unworthy of regard. What shall we say, if the same thing is done among us every day, and defended by no better argument, than the judgment of charity, which believeth all things. Charity teaches us to believe no ill of another without satisfying evidence, and forbids us to spread it, although it be true, without apparent necessity; but will charity either justify or excuse us, in solemnly affirming a positive fact, the existence of which is uncertain in itself, and to us unknown. I do not take upon me to say, that all are bad men who are guilty, by act or consent, of this practice, because I do not know how far the plea of ignorance or mistake may go; but this may be safely said that they do in a public capacity, what, if they were to do in a private capacity

capacity between man and man, would render them contemptible, or infamous, or both.

These two particulars have often brought reproach upon the church of Scotland, to which it is very difficult to make a proper reply. Would to God the occasion given for it were wholly taken away. In the mean time, every one who has a just regard to the glory of God, or the success of his own work, will endeavour to maintain such an uniformity of character, as will bear that examination, to which, it ought in justice, and must of necessity be exposed.

In the last place, I must beg leave to speak a few words to the people in general, on the subject of this discourse. You may learn, my brethren, from the preceeding discourse, by what rule you ought to judge, in all religious controversies, where a determination is necessary. Try all principles by their effects, and every person's pretences by his conduct. Examine, as far as you have proper evidence, who have real and vital religion most at heart, and what means do effectually promote it. Believe not every profession, but see which is most consistent in all its parts. Have patience, in difficult cases, till the tree have time to bring its fruits to maturity. Time will often write a clear and legible character, on what was very dark and dubious at first.

It is probable some will be ready to say, there is no small doubtfulness in this rule itself. There may be found good men of many different

rent parties; how then shall we judge between
 them? I answer, wherever there is true religion
 these persons are to be considered as the servants
 of God, and his grace in them is to be confessed
 without reluctance, and adored with thankfulness.
 There will, nevertheless, be still sufficient means
 to distinguish between one profession and another
 which hath the greatest influence in making man
 truly good. There may be, here and there, a good
 man under very great disadvantages. This may
 serve to keep us from a bigotted narrowness of
 mind, and uncharitable condemnation of others.
 But it will never occasion, in any prudent person,
 a departure from these principles, and the
 dispensation of ordinances, which he sees to be
 best for building him up in holiness and comfort
 through faith unto salvation. The truth is, one
 great design of this discourse was to teach men
 to distinguish between the upright and the worthless
 of all sects. Turn your zeal from parties
 to persons. Do not reproach or oppose men merely
 because they are of this or the other persuasion.
 But, wherever there is a wicked or a worldly
 man in the office of a minister, avoid the wolf
 in sheep's clothing for your own sake, and, if
 possible, drag off his disguise, that others may not
 be his prey. What doth it signify what party
 a man is of, if the foundations are destroyed, and
 truth and holiness, these inseparable companions
 are trampled under foot. When shall the time
 come, when the sincere lovers of Christ of every

denomination, shall join together in opposition to his open enemies and treacherous friends. There is a wonderful, though a natural union, among all worldly men, against the spirit and power of true religion wherever it appears. I am sorry to add, that this is one of the instances in which the children of this world are wiser in their generation than the children of light. Many will not meet together on earth for the worship of God, who shall have but one temple at last, where all from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south, shall meet, and join in their Creator and Redeemer's praise. The terms of admission into, and of exclusion from this happy dwelling are recorded in the following remarkable terms, with which I shall conclude this discourse, as, indeed they are the sum of all that has been said in it, *And there shall in no wise enter into it, any thing that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie, but they which are written in the Lamb's book of life* †.

† Rev. xxi. 27.

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Lamb's book of life.

17th Jan. 1727.